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Many Biracial Students Game Racial-Classification Systems, Study Suggests

By Peter Schmidt

A study of biracial people with black and white ancestry has found that many identify themselves solely as black when filling out college applications and financial-aid forms, raising new questions about the accuracy of educational statistics and research based on racial and ethnic data derived from students.

The study of 40 biracial people—all of whom reported having one black parent and one white one—found that 29, or nearly three-fourths, reported concealing their white ancestry in applying for college, scholarships, financial aid, or jobs.

"Frequently unaware that being biracial is often sufficient for affirmative-action purposes, they presented themselves exclusively as black," says a [summary](#) of the study's findings being published this month in [Social Psychology Quarterly](#), a peer-reviewed journal of the American Sociological Association.

In their article describing their methodology and results, the researchers behind the study stress that the biracial people who claimed only black ancestry on forms were simply appropriating—and employing to their advantage—a way of thinking about race that had been used throughout much of American history to oppress and disadvantage people like them. Under the "one-drop rule" rooted in slavery and the Jim Crow era, multiracial people with any black ancestry generally were treated simply as being black. Even now, the researchers found, many of the participants in the study felt much more accepted among black people than among whites.

Moreover, people from other segments of society have similarly been known to try to gain an advantage by manipulating how they are racially or ethnically classified. For example, colleges have long [struggled](#) with how to deal with white students who latch onto or falsely claim some small, far-removed portion of American Indian ancestry to gain an edge in applying for admission or financial aid. And a [study on enrollments](#) at three private California colleges, published in 2005, found evidence that white students were disproportionately more likely to fail to specify a race on college applications, thus probably inflating the declared minority enrollments of institutions that assume such students are multiracial.

Precision and Prejudice

The new study nonetheless represents bad news for those hoping that educational research on minority students would become more nuanced—and would better reflect the diversity of American society—in the wake of developments such as a 2000 revision of the U.S. census allowing people to check more than one box when asked their race.

The question of how to deal with the greater diversity of possible responses on questionnaires had already been controversial, with some researchers having [fought](#) new U.S. Education Department guidelines requiring colleges to report students who claim membership in more than one racial category as belonging to "two or more races," with no further detail given. What is at stake in such debates was made clear in a [study](#) presented in 2009 that crunched data on more than 22,000 undergraduate students using three different racial-classification schemes and concluded that how researchers classify biracial and multiracial students "can have profound implications" for their analyses.

The new study suggests that many researchers start out with bad data that conflate information on students with two black parents with information on students with one white parent and one black one, even though those biracial students are less likely, on average, to have grown up with the same disadvantages.

The researcher behind the study—Nikki Khanna, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Vermont, and Cathryn Johnson, a professor of sociology at Emory University—recruited their 40 research subjects by distributing fliers in an unnamed Southern urban city, asking "Do you have one black parent and one white parent?" They base their analyses on extensive interviews of the respondents conducted by Ms. Khanna in 2005 and 2006.

Partly because many of the recruiting fliers had been posted at colleges, more than half of the respondents were 18 to 22 years old, and just 15 percent were over the age of 30. All were either currently enrolled in college or college-educated, more than three-fourths were women, and most came from middle- or upper-middle-class backgrounds. The researchers caution in the article summarizing their study that their results might have been different if more of the subjects had been male or working class, or if the study had been conducted in another geographic region.

The article describes most of the research subjects as offering fairly precise descriptions of their racial backgrounds in their discussions with Ms. Khanna. In that context, just six of the 40 identified themselves as black, and 33 used some multiracial descriptor such as "biracial," "multiracial," or "mixed race."

How the respondents reported characterizing themselves elsewhere depended on the context, however, with 29 reporting that they "strategically" identified themselves only as black when they thought they would benefit from doing so. One respondent, whose name is given only as Natasha, told the researchers, "I know that if I say I'm 'biracial,' I will get certain things, and if I say I'm 'black,' I will get certain things." Another respondent, Julie,

said, "If I'm trying to get more money from the government, I am 'African American.' There is no white aspect to me."

In defining themselves as black, the study respondents "are not necessarily challenging contemporary social norms which arguably define them as black anyway," the article says. Nonetheless, it says, the study's findings "raise broader questions about who should benefit from affirmative-action programs," and whether beneficiaries should be required to have two black parents or whether the "one-drop rule" should be applied to people with biracial or multiracial backgrounds.

Susan Graham, executive director of Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally), an advocacy group for multiracial Americans, said she believes the article overstates how much people base their racial identification on self-interest. She also argued that, given how much racial-classification systems have changed in recent years, it is inappropriate to draw conclusions based on interviews conducted four or five years ago.

C. Anthony Broh, a higher-education policy consultant who played a key role in the debate over the Education Department's racial-classification system when he was director of research policy at the Consortium on Financing Higher Education, said he has no objection to biracial students identifying themselves as black to try to benefit from affirmative-action programs. Affirmative action, he said, is intended "to help students who are not part of the majority."